

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Communicable Disease Control

Syphilis

What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a bacterial infection, primarily a sexually transmitted disease (STD), caused by *Treponema pallidum*.

Who gets syphilis?

Any sexually active person can be infected with syphilis, although there is a greater incidence among young people between the ages of 15 and 30 years. It is more prevalent in urban than rural areas and in males than in females. There is also a high prevalence among male homosexuals and "crack" cocaine users who are exchanging sex for drugs.

How is syphilis spread?

Syphilis is spread by sexual contact with an infected individual, with the exception of congenital syphilis, which is spread from mother to fetus. Transmission by sexual contact requires exposure to moist lesions of skin or mucous membranes.

What are the symptoms of syphilis?

The first sign of syphilis is usually a sore(s) which is painless and appears at the site of initial contact. It may be accompanied by swollen glands, which develop within a week after the appearance of the initial sore. The sore will last from one to five weeks, and will disappear by itself even if no treatment is received.

Approximately six weeks after the sore first appears, a person will enter the second stage of the disease. The most common symptom during this stage is a rash which may appear on any part of the body: trunk, arms, legs, palms, soles, etc. Other, more generalized symptoms may also occur. These include tiredness, fever, sore throat, headaches, hoarseness, loss of appetite and swollen glands. These signs and symptoms will last two to six weeks, and will disappear in the absence of adequate treatment.

After the second stage of the disease, the only way syphilis can be detected is through a blood test, although secondary symptoms may occasionally recur. Late syphilis (syphilis of over four years' duration) may involve illness in the skin, bones, central nervous system and heart, and may shorten life, impair health and limit occupational efficiency.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms can appear from 10 to 90 days after a person becomes infected, but usually within three to four weeks.

When and for how long is a person able to spread syphilis?

Syphilis is considered to be communicable for a period of up to two years, possibly longer if untreated. The extent of communicability depends on the existence of infectious lesions (sores) which may or may not be visible.

Does past infection with syphilis make a person immune?

There is no natural immunity to syphilis and past infection offers no protection to the patient.

What is the treatment for syphilis?

Syphilis is treated with penicillin or doxycycline. Erythromycin is the treatment of choice in pregnant women who are allergic to penicillin. The amount of treatment depends on the stage of syphilis the patient is in.

What are the complications associated with syphilis?

Untreated syphilis can lead to destruction of soft tissue and bone, heart failure, insanity, blindness and a variety of other conditions which may be mild to incapacitating. Reported infant congenital syphilis cases in the United States increased to 628 in 1988.

What can be done to prevent the spread of syphilis?

There are a number of ways to prevent the spread of syphilis:

- X Limit your number of sex partners.
- X Use a condom.
- X Carefully wash genitals after sex.
- X If you think you are infected, avoid any sexual contact and visit your local STD clinic, a hospital or your doctor.
- X Notify all sexual contacts immediately so they can obtain examination and treatment.
- X All pregnant women should receive at least one prenatal blood test for syphilis.